The Underwater City

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Abstract

A collection of stories.

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The snow came down on Christmas day in thick, wet flakes and the next night Kurt, Joe, and I stacked icy lumps one on top of the other. Kurt bought those long pointed carrots and we used rocks for the eyes. We built six all together, two for each of us. Three days later, we stood in my backyard, pumping buckshot into snowmen until our trigger fingers turned purple and we ran out of cigarettes. When all that was left of the snowmen were stumps, we sat on the back porch stoop and drank beer. We used a mound of snow near the door as a cooler, the necks of the beer bottles sticking out like smokestacks.

"It looks like Hoth," Joe said, his breath visible.

"Like what?" Kurt asked.

"Hoth," Joe said. "The snow planet in *Star Wars*. The one with those big walkers." He pointed to my yard with his bottle.

The house and land had belonged to my dad. He drank himself to death a couple years ago. My mom blamed the post office, said they worked him too hard, didn't give him enough time off, but he was an alcoholic and his liver called it quits on his sixtieth birthday. She told me that I could do whatever I wanted with the house, as long as she wasn't involved. She lived with her second husband in Eau Claire.

The property stretched back about two acres, right up against a line of naked trees that ran across the horizon in both directions. At night, after it snowed, all you could see from the porch was white. It looked like the end of the world.

"Which one was that?" Kurt asked. He stood and took a shotgun in each hand, setting them against the sliding glass doors that led into the house. Kurt's boots shook the porch as he walked, bits of snow falling off the railings with each step. It was easy to forget he weighed close to three hundred pounds. His movements were fluid, almost graceful. The year before, he placed second in the La Crosse County Fair Hay Bale Toss Tournament. In high school, we all thought he'd play in the NFL, but the college scouts said he was too soft—a big teddy bear.

"Empire," I said, finishing a beer.

"You guys want another?" Joe asked. He pulled two bottles from the mound.

Kurt started to say something, but his phone went off, playing a country song I couldn't place. He pulled it from his pocket.

"My dad," he said. "I should take this." He flipped the phone open and moved toward the house, while Joe and I went back to our beers. I looked out over the boot prints and the ruins of the snow people. Bright orange shotgun shells lay scattered across the yard. We'd pick them up tomorrow, or when the snow melted.

"I love this time of year," Joe said. "I'm glad we still do this."

"Me too," I lied. Every Christmas, I'd think next year will be different. I will have moved on. But I always ended up on my back porch, getting drunk and shooting the shit with my high school buddies. I was twenty-seven, Kurt and Joe were two years older.

Kurt paced back and forth behind us, occasionally saying "yeah" or "uh huh." After a minute or two, he hung up and sat down beside me.

"Troy's roommate called my parents." Troy was Kurt's little brother, a junior at La Crosse. "He said Troy hasn't been home for two days. They called the police. The cops are checking the river."

"Jesus Christ," Joe said.

"I have to go home," Kurt said.

"He's probably staying with somebody else. A girl maybe," I said.

"None of his friends have seen him. My parents called around."

"I'm sure he's fine," Joe said.

"Yeah," Kurt said, standing up.

I didn't want to look at him so I looked up at the stars, but all I could think about was the Mississippi River—fast, wide and ice cold.

#

Since 1995, seven men between the ages of 18 and 23 have drowned in the section of the Mississippi that cuts through the city of La Crosse. All of them had a blood alcohol level of at least point two three. All of them were college students. I know this because everyone in Western Wisconsin knows this. I also know that, for a city of its size, La Crosse has the most bars per capita in the United States, or at least that's what people say. That's why I wasn't surprised to see Troy's picture on the six o'clock news on New Year's Eve. I was angry, but I wasn't surprised. The broadcast shifted between footage of police officers searching the river banks with German Shepherds, and a series of statistics detailing the history of the drownings. They found his body a few miles south of the city, near Green Island Park, sweatshirt snagged on a piece of driftwood.

Joe and I sat in my basement, taking turns getting beer from the fridge, not saying anything. A row of mounted deer my dad had killed lined the fake wood-paneled wall behind the TV. Joe wore an old Bart Starr jersey, the white on the numbers flaking near the edges. He called it his drinking uniform.

A female reporter spoke in front of the riverbank. She looked tired and cold. Snowflakes stuck to her microphone. She said the police would issue a report after an autopsy was completed.

"And guess what they'll come up with?" Joe responded, shifting in his recliner, setting an empty beer can next to a row of others on the carpet. "Another drunk kid got too close and fell in. It's bullshit." He cracked a can and sipped at the foam pooling on the rim. "Somebody in this city is drugging those kids and throwing them in the river."

Joe got fired from his job at the Kwik Trip on Cass Street for pocketing packs of cigarettes, and the brewery gave me New Year's Day off, so we were going pretty hard. Joe had a tendency to ramble when he drank and nothing got his juices flowing like a good conspiracy.

"Those fuckheads in the police department wouldn't know a murder if it fell out of the sky and landed in their laps. Kurt's brother is dead and you know what they're gonna say, right? They're gonna say that this is about drinking, that the community has a problem."

The theory popped up when we were in college, after the cops found a baseball player named Shumaker in the river. He was the sixth. His parents released statements, started writing editorials to the *Tribune*, posted on online forums, claiming that the La Crosse PD was a vindictive organization bent on proving a point about binge drinking rather than exploring potential leads. The Shumakers believed their son had been murdered. The theory

spread quickly, and pretty soon you couldn't go to a football game without hearing whispers about a serial killer who stalked Third Street after bar time. The problem was no one could produce any evidence—nothing to imply foul play.

"Maybe they're right," I said. "Maybe we do have a problem."

"Are you kidding me?" Joe sat up in his chair. He had that look in his eyes like his mind was somewhere far away, somewhere foggy and damp. "You're telling me that eight dead in fifteen years isn't a *little* suspicious? I've read books about this stuff. What are the chances that it's all coincidence?"

"Who knows?" I aked, not feeling up to an argument. In my mind, I saw Troy walking down toward the river—tripping over snow banks—drunk and cold. I bet he couldn't even see the ice. He probably didn't realize where he was when the ground opened up and the world washed away.

I stood and walked to the mini-fridge. "You want another?"

"Does the Pope shit in the woods?" Joe said, too loudly.

#

I saw Kurt at the funeral, and again two weeks later. Another storm swept in from the west and dumped a fresh foot of powder. It took us fifteen minutes to shovel Joe's truck out and, after we did, we headed downtown toward Kurt's apartment. Along the country roads, the snow was smooth and the drifts covering the cornfields looked like long, white waves. Joe drove fast and spit tobacco into an empty Gatorade bottle. I gripped the emergency handle near the ceiling and scanned the fields for deer.

In the city, the streets were empty and coated with a thick layer of brown slush. Students were still on break and the only traffic seemed to be either coming from or headed to the hospital. Ice hung from lampposts and street signs like crystal stalactites. The moon was full and the stars were out.

"I'm nervous I won't know what to say to him." Joe wiped spit from his beard with the sleeve of his jacket.

"You don't have to say anything. He just wants to hang out. Take his mind off things," I said.

"I know. I know. I feel so goddamn awful."

"You and me both."

Kurt answered the door in a yellowing undershirt and a pair of old basketball shorts. He looked like shit—full beard and dark eyes—and the place smelled like he'd been boiling a gallon of sweat on the stove.

"Hey bud," Joe said. We were shoulder to shoulder in the doorframe, pretending like we weren't assessing the damage, acting like we weren't thinking of excuses to turn around and drive home.

"Come on in. Grab a drink. Throw your coats anywhere." Despite looking like he'd recently woken up from hibernation, Kurt sounded alert, caffeinated.

The living space in Kurt's one bedroom contained an old futon, a love seat and a recliner with broken springs, which sank so far down that when you sat in it your ass was only inches off the ground. The middle school where Kurt taught a gym class had given him a couple weeks off and, from the looks of things, that time had been spent sitting in front of the TV, eating fast food and drinking. The place looked like the apartment of a run-down

detective in one of those black and white noirs from the 50's, complete with take-out boxes and empty bottles.

Joe grabbed a few beers from the fridge and we sat in our usual seats; I was in the recliner, Kurt and Joe shared the loveseat, and we threw empties on the futon. A Bucks game was on TV with the volume turned down low. Kurt took his laptop off the coffee table and flipped it open. The light from the screen washed out the color on his face. He looked gaunt and pale; he looked like a corpse.

"I've got money on this game," I said. "Bucks by five at half."

"You should have flushed that money down the toilet. Better odds," Joe said.

We watched silently, the only sounds were the click of the trackpad and Kurt's fingers punching the keys too hard, as if he was trying to press them through the base of the computer.

"My folks got the police report yesterday," he said, stretching his lower lip out with two fingers, using the other hand to pad down dip in the gap between his gums and his cheek. "Accidental drowning due to severe intoxication." He wrapped his thumb in his shirt and pressed against the top of an empty beer can until the aluminum tore and the hole was big enough to spit in. The tobacco smelled sweet and bitter, like mint chewing gum dipped in red wine.

"Troy's BAC was point four one," Kurt said.

"Shit," Joe said.

"Jesus," I said. That seemed like it should have been enough. Those numbers were all we needed. Case closed.

“His friends say he wandered off between bars. They figured he was walking home.” Kurt shook his head while he spoke as if he didn’t believe anything he was saying. “Troy’s not that stupid, not even when he’s drunk. He knew the river was dangerous. He’d heard the stories.”

“He was a sharp kid,” Joe said.

“The sharpest,” I said.

A few beers later Kurt said, “I think I know what really happened.”

I tensed up and prayed that Kurt wouldn’t say what I thought he was going to say.

“I’ve been reading online,” he said. “I’ve got a theory.”

He said his little brother was murdered. Murdered by the same person or people responsible for the deaths of seven other young men. He had a story down, memorized like he’d been waiting weeks to share it with anyone.

Here’s how he told it: Troy left his friends around bar time. It was snowing. He didn’t have a jacket. A few blocks off Third Street a car pulled up. The driver was either an off-duty cop, a beautiful woman, or a kind stranger. Kurt wasn’t sure exactly. The stranger offered Troy a ride and he accepted. They drove to the river. Troy was too drunk to realize where he was and the stranger helped him down to the shore. From there, the details get sketchy, but either way, Kurt said, Troy ended up out on the ice, which was pretty thin. Maybe the stranger watched from the shore or maybe he threw something heavy, like a rock, and then the ice snapped and Troy was underwater. There one second, gone the next. Pulled down hard and fast by the Mississippi’s current.

Kurt said the specifics were inferred. He said he’d borrowed ideas and theories from comments on the Internet.

"How much did Troy weigh?" I asked, when Kurt was finished. He fished tobacco from his mouth with a crooked finger.

"240. Maybe 250. Why?"

"Just wondering," I said.

"I think you're onto something," Joe said. He sounded excited. "I don't want to rush to any conclusions, but, I mean, come on."

Kurt nodded and went back to the computer. It was halftime in Milwaukee. The Bucks were down big.

"Looks like you lost your bet," Joe said.

"Sure looks that way," I said.

#

I started getting two or three emails from Kurt every day. The subject line always said the same thing: EVIDENCE. The body was usually a comment he'd copied from a news forum or a blog with a title like *Unsolved Mysteries* or *Twisted Minds.* A lot of them read the same, but a few stood out.

> **UWLqb3:** There's just too many oddities about the situation. HOwcome after the last student died, they increased the police force on campus, a mile and a half from the river? The cops are doing NOTHING to stop these deaths.
>
> **Sconny07:** THESE MEN WERE MURDERED!!! MY FRIEND IS AN EX COP AND HE SAYS THE KILLER IS A DOCTOR OR A NURSE. HE KNOWS PEOPLE IN THE LPD. HE SAYS THEY ARE LYING!!
>
> **Bbraun:** i said all along that it was a serial killer on the loose. The police want to make this about drinking. This is not about drinking. some psychopath is killing our children.

I started following the blogs, scanning the comment sections. I couldn't help it. One person said he thought an evil spirit was responsible. An ancient demon wanted penance for the sins of the city. A few commenters refuted the theories, but their words were buried beneath the caps-locked shouts of an angry mob.

When I went back to work, Joe and Kurt started spending more time together. They made a website called *Find Troy Coleman's Killer.* The same title was printed in white block letters on the top of the page, over a picture of Troy in his football uniform. The rest of the site was mostly theories, accusations against the police and the city of La Crosse, typed in a bright blue font that burned against the black background. They started getting support from the community, letters and phone calls from the parents of past victims, concerned citizens and people who, for various reasons (mostly DUI related), hated the local law enforcement.

Joe asked me if I wanted to help raise awareness by handing out flyers on campus. I told him I was really swamped and didn't have time. I felt like a traitor. I'd helped Kurt coach Troy's middle school baseball team. Kurt was a pallbearer at my father's funeral. I owed him something; I just wasn't sure what that was. After I said no, I didn't hear from either of them for a few days, and Kurt stopped sending me emails.

"People have been lied to for years," Joe told me over the phone, as I drove home from the brewery smelling like burned wheat and barley. "Parents have lost their children. Our best friend lost his brother. Don't we deserve the truth?" He sounded like a politician.

"Yeah," I said. "I think we do."

But, I thought, what if the truth is dumb and simple and makes us feel guilty? I drove past storefronts that changed owners every six months and a long stretch of bars. I kept trying to imagine the night Troy died, the way Kurt described it. The whole scene felt like a rerun of

Law and Order. In my mind, I couldn't help picturing the stage lights, the cameras, the killer in a black ski mask and slick leather gloves. It was fantasy, pure and simple. A composite of all the *48 Hour Mysteries* the town had ever watched and every paperback detective novel we'd ever read. It was hard to blame a kid for being young and drunk, but if we had some shadowy figure that hunted kids in the woods, then we had a villain, someone to take the fall, the devil drowning boys in the Mississippi. We had someone who wasn't us.

I felt sick to my stomach when I hung up, but that was nothing compared to how I felt when I turned down West Avenue and saw a homemade sign hanging from the side of the Farm & Fleet, plastered with pictures of Kurt's little brother, that read, "FIND TROY COLEMAN'S KILLER."

#

My father told me once that the only thing to be absolutely certain about was that absolute certainty always led to you looking like an absolute asshole. I guess that's the reason I ended up sitting in my car on Division Street a little after two in the morning. I parked halfway between the bars and the river, and kept the car running, watching as drunk frat boys stumbled beside their drunk, high-heeled girlfriends, who despite the cold, still chose to wear short, sequined dresses that shimmered in the darkness like candlelight.

I had a pack of cigarettes, a water bottle filled with Cool Blue Gatorade and vodka, and a bag of venison jerky from a deer Joe's uncle had shot and processed. The stake-out had no real goal or game plan, I only wanted to watch, take stock of the night, the drunk kids, the ease with which someone might be lured to the river. From Division, I could make out two bars on the corner of Third Street, long lines of shivering kids standing outside each,

breathing into their gloves, exhaling puffs of frozen air. Watching felt voyeuristic and creepy, but it was also a little satisfying, almost exciting, like I was living out a scene from *Lethal Weapon,* like I was Mel Gibson, watching and waiting for the drug deal to go wrong. That excitement was short lived, because I remembered the thing most buddy cop movies require is a buddy, and I hadn't heard from mine in days.

I ripped through a few cigarettes to stay sharp, polishing off the last pieces of jerky. The snow started falling around bar time. The night became dreamy as the flakes turned to sparks under the streetlights, and I struggled to keep my eyes open. The crowds seeped out of bars in long lines like ants from an anthill. There was shouting, flying snowballs, and a few aborted fights between chants of "Go Pack, go!" I was waiting for the streets to clear, I wanted to watch the stragglers, those too drunk to follow the crowds, the kids who got lost and separated, slipping on the slick sidewalks, squinting at the frost-caked street signs.

When the streets were covered in white and the Gatorade vodka mix gone, I realized how easy it would be to coax a drunk kid down to the water. They were all so dumb and blind and fixated on getting laid. All I needed was a decent pair of tits and I could convince one of the stragglers we'd fuck on the condition that he walked across the frozen river first. There'd be nothing to link me to the death; the proof—the footprints—might melt in the morning, or be filled in by a new layer of snow before they found the body. I understood then, if there was a killer, he or she was a genius.

Half-drunk, I left my car, and followed a fat kid in a Flyers Jersey down Front Street. He looked lost, and every few steps he'd sigh and kick a snow drift. I walked faster and closed the gap, until I was close enough that all it would take was a baseball bat or a rock to bring him down. He was oblivious, slouched, eyes cast down, cursing himself, his friends,

the cold. I'll admit it, I thought about it. I thought about how easy it'd be to wrap my hands around his flabby neck and squeeze. People are fragile. It doesn't take much. Just a pair of hands and some force.

When I heard a police siren in the distance, I considered how hard it would be to explain what I was doing. I half ran, half walked back to the car and when I tried to pull out, the tires spun and spun in the snow, squealing and sputtering, giving off an acrid smoke that smelled like burned plastic. *I need to get out of here now,* I thought as the tires caught pavement, and I shot down Third Street, past the black-windowed bars and empty sidewalks.

#

The Packers were in the playoffs that year, and they were on a real tear. One of those seasons that only comes around once, maybe twice in a lifetime. Everybody forgot about everything when the Packers played, so the three of us figured it'd be a good idea to get a little drunk and go downtown to watch the game. Joe said they needed a break. He said they'd been working hard on the website, trying to get the word out, build support. He said they needed national coverage, which would lead to a federal investigation, and then they'd catch the son of a bitch. I asked him if we could not talk about it for a night and he agreed.

We usually drank at Dell's but the TVs there were shit, so we went to Top Shot, a pool bar that had flat-screens wall to wall. I was three sheets to the wind when we got there so by kickoff my tongue felt heavy and I kept my hand on a pool table when I stood. The place was filled with college students and you had to drop a shoulder and squeeze between bodies to get to the bar. We sat in a booth toward the back and yelled at the TV in unison with the crowd. At halftime, when things started to get a little fuzzy, we decided to move

around a bit, play some pool. The game was a blowout, so people stopped caring near the end; instead they focused their attention on getting as drunk as possible, as quickly as possible. I did the same.

Things get a little choppy after that. I can only pick out fragments. I remember losing Joe and Kurt, and when I found them again, I tripped on something and dropped my glass. People in the crowd laughed and clapped while I tried to pick up the pieces. Then there was a lot of yelling, and when I looked up, I saw Kurt shove someone. There was movement that I couldn't track and I got knocked over in the shuffle. People screamed and pushed and a mass of bodies rushed through the front door. Dizzy and confused, I followed.

Outside, on the sidewalk there was more yelling, and I pulled a glass shard from the meaty part of my palm. Blood fell down my arm in long, thin streaks. Ignoring the gash, I scanned the sidewalk and saw Kurt and Joe kicking someone on the pavement. I remember he was small, and blood was draining from his nose. His body was limp. I realized this was my opportunity to prove my loyalty, so I joined them and started stomping. I rammed my heel into his stomach like I was pressing a shovel into the ground. He curled up in the fetal position while we kicked and kicked until Kurt told me to run, so I ran.

#

I woke up face down on Kurt's futon. My eyes were pressed against the cushions and I could barely breathe. I thought I was dead, but I turned my head and saw Kurt and Joe sitting side by side on the loveseat, drinking coffee, and watching TV. They were watching the news, looking for their names or faces on the screen. The shades were drawn, but the sunlight that

made it through was enough to make my head pound. I turned and tried to press my palm to my forehead, but found blood caked and smeared across my arm.

"Jesus. What happened?" I asked.

"You fell and cut yourself in the bar. We tried to clean it last night but you passed out before we could," Kurt said. He seemed calm and wide-awake.

"No, I mean to that guy. What did we do to that guy?"

"He said some shit so we taught him a lesson," Joe said. They both stared at the TV as they spoke, taking slow sips from their mugs. Kurt's mug had a picture of a keg on it. Underneath the keg was black print that read, "Win or Lose, We Still Booze."

I tried to stand, but my legs burned and my calves cramped, so I sat up and let my head roll against the metal bar on the back of the futon. "What did he say?" I kept my eyes closed.

"He said something about Troy," Kurt said.

"What? Why? He knew your brother?"

"No, but he insulted him," Kurt said.

"Indirectly," Joe said.

"I don't understand." The conversation made my headache worse.

"We were talking about the website, about a new theory we'd read somewhere, and this little dude breaks into the conversation and says something like 'You guys don't really believe that shit, do you?'" Joe spoke with a strained, nervous excitement.

"I told him to watch his mouth, but he kept going. He was talking about Santa Claus and the boogeyman. He said those theories were a way for sad families to avoid feeling shitty

about themselves." Kurt spoke slowly, keeping his eyes on the TV. "So, I shoved him, he tried to hit me and that was that."

"That was that?" I asked.

"Yeah, we took him outside and beat his ass," Kurt said.

"That was that," Joe said.

I peeled my boots and socks off; they were still damp from the snow I'd run through. The toes on my right foot were fat and purple. Big blueberries.

"You sure were whaling on him." Joe pointed at my foot. "I feel bad for that bastard's ribcage."

My stomach gurgled and the roof of my mouth tasted like I'd swallowed a bunch of pennies the night before. I stood and tried to run to the bathroom, but I only made it to the kitchen sink before a river of old beer and bile rushed from my throat. Emptied, I sank down and pressed my cheek to the cold linoleum.

#

Later that night, the police came to my house, but before that, after I left Kurt's place, I went down to the river. A circular, open patch of pavement sits on top of a hill looking out over the water, next to the bridge that leads to the airport. I parked and started walking down the hill toward the water. Snow gathered in the space between my wet socks and my boots, and my foot pulsed with each step. My right hand was wrapped in a few sheets of paper towel secured with a strip of duct tape. It was cold and the day felt too bright, almost florescent.

I usually felt guilty when I was hungover, but it was never anything like this. The feeling rattled and shook in my gut, and I thought I might puke again. I tried to pinpoint the

source, as I climbed down the snowy hill, tripping over hidden rocks. That kid's bloody face. The bodies in the river. Troy holding his gold-striped football helmet under his arm. Everything felt jumbled in my head. I didn't start that fight, Kurt and Joe did. They did most of the damage. And I was drunk, really drunk, I didn't know what I was doing. But that wasn't true. I was a part of this; wrapped up like everyone else.

I reached the bank of the river and tested the ice with my boot. It was solid and slick, covered in a thin layer of snow. The river didn't freeze over every year, but when it did, it was beautiful. The ice stretched out forever, and everything was flat and even. I didn't know why I was there, or what I was trying to prove, but I kept walking. Maybe I hoped the ice would give and I'd get pulled under. Then the long string of coincidences would end, and the city would see the truth. They'd fish out my body from the water and understand that all the shame had been misplaced. They'd repent.

But I knew that wasn't true. The theories would evolve, work around the facts. They'd say the killer was changing, getting smarter and picking new victims. Everything would stay the same.

Near the middle of the river, the wind picked up and I had to squint to see through the snow. I listened for the hiss of breaking ice, but the ground was solid. I could feel the river under my boots and I knew that it would never stop flowing. I wished that there were a killer. I wished I had someone to blame. But there wasn't, and I couldn't.

My hand started bleeding again, so I ran a fingernail across my makeshift bandage. Finding the edge, I picked and peeled, the tape ripping off in strips like old skin. The cut was deep and rimmed with shades of purple. It looked infected. Blood pooled in my palm, and, tipping my hand, it fell in heavy drops against the ice.

I didn't have anything to stop the bleeding, so I grabbed a chunk of snow and pressed it to the wound. The cold felt good. I pressed and pressed, using my thumb to jam the snow into the cut. I wanted it inside of me, in my veins. I wanted the snow to melt and mix with my blood. The flesh under my palm turned numb and my fingers started to tingle. Everything was cold, and, for a moment, I couldn't feel anything.

Burned Hair

Anne was drunk again, and she asked me if I believed in Jesus Christ. Randy and I stood behind the checkout counter of the Sun Valley Blockbuster. He polished the underside of a DVD against his yellow polo, while I stood staring at the computer monitor, pretending to search inventory. Anne leaned against the counter, angled like she was stretching out her calves. I couldn't concentrate, because I smelled her breath. It reeked like gin and the moldy carpet in my Grandma's basement. She was tall and thin, and she wore a backpack and a few flannel layers even though it was seventy degrees outside. She carried these puffy, plastic grocery store bags, the handles stretched so thin they looked like string. Randy told me once, while Anne was in the bathroom, he opened a bag to see what was inside.

"Just more bags," he said.

Our manager, Pete, told us Anne wasn't allowed in the store anymore, not after he caught her trying to smuggle out a king size Snickers bar. But it wasn't that simple. She wasn't a very good listener.

"Yes I do," I said. "I believe in Jesus Christ and so does Randy."

"Amen," Randy said.

Anne nodded her head. "Good, good," she said, rapidly tapping her foot against the laminate hardwood. It seemed like she never stopped moving. If her legs weren't bouncing, she was swinging her bags back and forth, trying to gain momentum. "Very good."

"We both accepted Jesus as our personal Lord and savior when we were children," I said.

"Praise be." Randy raised his hands to the ceiling.

People like to complain about Jehovah's Witnesses, about door-to-door evangelists, but they never really bothered me. My dad taught me a trick, a quick way to get them off your porch. "You've got to lie," he told me. "It don't matter if you're Hindi, Muslim, Atheist or Catholic, all you got to do is tell them that you believe."

"Well," Anne said. "I'm happy to hear that. That's good news, great news." She turned to leave, seemingly satisfied with my answer, but when she reached the door, she turned around, plastic bags swinging at her sides, and said, "It's amazing, really just amazing…" She trailed off, looking around the store, wide-eyed, like the Blockbuster—all the blues and yellows, the movie posters and DVD cases—was too much for her to absorb all at once. "It's amazing that one day, all of us will be together in eternity."

Randy moaned and walked toward the bathroom, coughing to cover his laughter.

"Yeah, Anne, it is amazing," I said. She turned and walked out the door.

After the sun went down and our shift ended, Randy and I sat in his Dodge Neon, got high, and listened to death metal for a while. I was eighteen that summer. Randy was two years older and took Business classes at the community college downtown. His favorite movie was the *Exorcist* and he had *Cannibal Corpse* and *Obituary* tattooed across his collarbone.

When the car's interior was foggy and my head felt as heavy as a bowling ball, Randy stretched his arms toward the roof of the car and pulled off his polo, struggling like it was an extra layer of skin. Underneath, he wore a black T-shirt with the words "Rotten Sound"

painted across the chest in red, dripping font. Below the text was a stylized image of a mummified corpse, standing ridged over the edge of a cliff, the flesh on its face peeling away. The skin reminded me of rotten wallpaper.

"What do you think happened to Anne?" Randy asked, pulling at the rubber band that held his ponytail in place, tugging until it gave and black hair fell over the sides of his face. "Why'd she turn out the way she did?"

"I don't know. Drugs, probably." I scanned the surrounding cars, paranoid. The Blockbuster shared a parking lot with Wal-Mart, and it was big, but if someone saw us, we could lose our jobs.

Randy coughed out smoke and handed me the pipe. "She is…was somebody's daughter once." He shuffled through the glove box and came out with a make-up pen. Starring at the rearview, he pulled dark lines under his eyes until they turned raccoon black. Then he took a series of small, silver studs from a plastic bag and fixed them into his face, one by one. Transformed, he looked like an angsty robot, sleepy and malevolent. Randy played drums in a speed metal band called Black Ice. He usually went to practice after work.

"Yeah, you're right," I said. Sometimes, when Randy smoked, he turned sour and only wanted to talk at about things depressing or morbid. That night, I wasn't in the mood to humor him. "I'm pretty stoned," I said. "I think I should go."

He offered me a ride, but I told him I'd rather bike. I like the exercise. The Blockbuster was sandwiched between Honey's Nails and Fuzzy's Liquor. Near the strip mall, the pavement glowed red and blue under the neon lights. I walked across the parking lot to the bike rack on the side of Fuzzy's.

I found Anne, slumped over, passed out against the bike rack, using her backpack as a pillow. Pete told me to call the cops if I found her like this, but she wasn't hurting anyone, so I unlocked the chain and pedaled home.

Cutting through town, I wondered what she dreamed about, or if it was even possible to dream when you were that drunk. Maybe she dreamed in slow motion, or she mouthed slurred words in her sleep. Did she dream of Jesus, his long brown hair, his pale skin shimmering in a field of clouds? Or did she have the dreams I had, the dreams where I'm chased by something dark. The dreams where I'm trying to outrun a looming shadow or a giant black wave.

I hoped she didn't dream at all. It made me feel better.

#

"We have a serious Anne problem," Pete said. He was standing beside the New Release shelf, in front of a series of framed movie posters. Over his shoulder I could see Angelina Jolie standing tall in a skintight body suit the color of sharkskin, her hands hovering over holstered pistols. Pete wore a lot of pastels and took his job too seriously. He had a tendency to enforce regulations regarding the proper distance between displayed DVD cases. His favorite movies were *Shawshank Redemption* and *Lawrence of Arabia.* In my periphery, I could see Randy stocking a shelf and playing the air drums. He swatted at nothing like he was after an invisible bee.

"She's a nuisance and her presence affects business. This franchise is rated 18th in customer service in the entire state. We pride ourselves on creating a safe, family-friendly environment. From now on, this Blockbuster has a strict zero tolerance policy when it comes

to all things Anne." Pete removed his glasses, holding them up to the light, looking for dust or smudges.

"What do you mean by zero tolerance?" I asked.

"If you let her in and I find out, you're gone."

"Seriously?"

"Seriously," he said. "I'll let you tell Randy."

I didn't really like Anne, she smelled terrible and she talked about September 11th a lot, but I felt bad for her. As long as nobody was around, and she didn't ask about the religious stuff, she wasn't a big problem. I was never sure where she lived, or if she had a place to stay at all. I knew the Methodist church on Bird Street ran a shelter, but she didn't talk about it. She usually pan-handled outside the liquor store a few times a week, and sometimes, when I worked nights, I'd find her passed out in different places—by the dumpster or in front of the nail salon—but she was understandably inconsistent and most of my shifts were Anne-free. She was harmless really, but she had a habit of yelling at police cars and asking strangers about their political beliefs, and that freaked people out.

She came back the day after Pete established his new policy. Summer afternoons were usually slow. Sometimes old people and middle school kids stopped in, shuffling through the sales bin, browsing the dollar movies, but mostly it was just Randy and I.

We were in the process of restocking the Thriller shelf when I told him to cover me while I took his one-hitter into the bathroom and carefully aimed thin streams of smoke out the window. I finished, waved the smoke away, and doused myself in cologne. Back on the sales floor, I saw Randy bent over a plastic bucket full of DVDs, while Anne stood against

the front counter, flipping through a New-Releases brochure. She was talking about the Federal Reserve.

"This country will be bankrupt in ten years. There's…there's no basis for our currency. It's all imagined value." The economy, along with Jesus, the apocalypse, immigration and inter-dimensional beings were Anne's main topics of conversation, so the situation felt normal. Randy felt bad for Anne too. He'd lived out of his car for a few months after high school, and he was generally more tolerant of her ramblings.

The store was quiet and empty, and the white plaster shelves looked fuzzy and dull even with the thick summer light pouring in through the front windows. Several wall-mounted TV monitors played *Snow White*. The voices and the music sounded far away like the movie was playing next door. Randy had a soft spot for Disney princesses. He showed me the Cinderella tattoo on his ankle during our second shift together.

"Hi, Anne," I said walking behind the front counter. I looked at her dirty, chipped nails as she flipped through glossy photos and movie posters, and then something in my mind snapped, and I thought, "Oh shit."

"Shitshitshit." I forgot to tell Randy what Pete had said. "Anne, you've got to go." I ran around the counter and snatched the brochure. "You're not allowed in here anymore."

"What? Since when? This is America. I can do what I want." The words all ran together. She was drunk, and I figured, likely to make a scene. It was too late. We'd both lose our jobs.

"You're freaking out. Just relax. No one's here. She's not hurting anyone," Randy said.

"Nope. No. Anne, you have to leave our I'll call the police."

“Fine, fine, fine.” She mumbled, picking up her plastic bags. “Don’t have a fit.” The door chimed as she left, and we watched her turn the corner towards Fuzzy’s.

“Dude, what the hell?” Randy dragged the bucket of DVDs behind the counter.

“We’re okay.” I took a deep breath. “Pete said if we let her in again, he’d fire us.”

“Holy shit. Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I forgot,” I said. “But we should be all right, as long as no one saw her.”

“No one’s been in for like an hour.”

“Good. Good. Everything’s okay.”

“You’ve got to quit being so paranoid.” Randy walked back to the Horror aisle carrying a stack of movies. He shifted a few DVD cases around to make room for *Hellraiser III: Hell on Earth.* I sat down on the stool in front of the computer monitor, and watched as the screen shimmered gently, the words blurry and difficult to distinguish. Considering how much time and concentration it took me to type “hellraiser” into the inventory search bar, I figured I was pretty high. I was attempting to assess exactly how high when I remember the security cameras.

#

The night shift wasn’t that bad, and Pete let Randy and I work together again after a few weeks. When he saw the security footage, Pete told us we weren’t fired, but he was disappointed. He trusted me.

“Be more vigilant,” he had said. “Be a leader. Care about the customer.”

One of the benefits of the night shift was after ten, when business slowed, we could play whatever movies we wanted over the monitors. One night in July, Randy and I got really

stoned and turned on *Carrie*. It was almost eleven and the only people in the store were a drunk couple, tripping over each other and giggling at movie titles, and a group of three teenage girls—thirteen, fourteen years old maybe. All three wore navy sweatpants with words printed across the ass, and pink T-shirts covered in volleyballs and multicolored, handwritten signatures. They looked like a little gang, like the wanted to stir shit up, maybe see how much they could get away with.

I recognized the tallest of the three; she was thin, lanky and still had braces. I figured she'd be pretty in a few years, but her movements felt robotic, self-conscious, and she'd glance over her shoulder every few minutes. Her name was Jenny Carlson. Her father was Henry. He had coached my junior varsity basketball team, and he was a real prick. The vanity license plate on his Suburban read "DR HC," and midway through practices, he'd launch into twenty-minute tirades about the real world, practical applications of basketball.

"You've got to set up a good defense," he'd say. "The other team will stop at nothing to beat you. You have to protect yourself." He was on marriage number three.

I sat behind the counter while Randy cleaned DVDs in the backroom. On the wall monitors, a large group of high school students slow danced around a sparsely decorated gymnasium. The drunk couple eventually left without renting anything, but not before the woman stumbled into one of the candy racks, sending boxes of Raisinets and Sour Patch Kids across the carpet.

"I am *so, so sorry*," she said.

"It's okay," I said. "I'll take care of it." I bent down on one knee, grabbing candy by the handful. When I finished, and all the bright boxes and bags were back in order, I turned to see Jenny Carlson standing over the sales bin near the front of the store.

"Hey," Jenny said, and the three girls followed me to the front counter. She rapped her knuckle against the wood. "We wanted to rent something. Do you have any recommendations?" She was chewing bubble gum. Bits of pink stuck to the blue rubber bands strung around her braces.

"Well, what kind of movies do you like?" I tried to act annoyed, tried to pretend I didn't appreciate the attention.

"What kind of movies do *you* like?" asked the blonde girl on Jenny's left. They stood in a row: blonde, black, brunette. I wondered if Jenny picked those two on purpose. Maybe she found some sort of balance in the diversity.

"I like horror," I said, nodding towards one of the monitors. On the screen a blood-soaked girl in a prom dress shivered and shook on stage in front of hundreds of her classmates. "John Carpenter. Wes Craven. That sort of stuff."

"Ew," Jenny said. "Anything else?"

"Have you seen *Blade Runner*?" I asked. Randy was still in the back room, and I was glad.

"No." Jenny popped her gum and leaned in closer. "What's it about?" Something about the conversation felt disingenuous, like she had been dared to come talk to me, but I didn't really care.

"It's about this guy named Deckard. It takes place in the future. He's a bounty hunter, but he doesn't hunt people, he hunts androids. But the androids look exactly like people. Like you mom could be an android and you'd have no idea. And Deckard has this test to find out who's real and who's not. It's an empathy test. The androids can't feel empathy. Anyways, the thing is, you're never really sure if Deckard is actually human."

"Cool," Jenny said, nodding.

"I probably shouldn't have told you that last part," I said.

"Ah, Jen," the brunette said, looking at her green wristwatch. "I think we need to go."

Jenny squinted at my nametag. "Thanks for the advice, Simon." She smiled and walked toward the door, but before she passed the theft detectors she turned around. "Do you think you could do us a favor? Can we borrow a lighter?"

Reaching into my pocket, I fumbled past my keys and felt the smooth plastic body of the cheap BIC lighter. I flicked the wheel, made sure there was butane enough for a spark or two and tossed it across the counter. The brunette giggled and Jenny gave me a look that said, *we owe you one,* and the three girls walked, single-file out to the parking lot.

Through the window near the front door, I saw the girls huddle together beside a pick-up truck. Neon lights flooded the pavement, and their faces looked pale and blue in the darkness, like aliens, preparing to transform back into their real bodies. Jenny said something and they laughed together at a joke I assumed was at my expense. All three bent at the waist, holding their knees, like the joke was so funny they might puke, and when the laughter stopped, Jenny pulled a pack of cigarettes from her purse. They passed the lighter around, took shallow pulls from the cigarettes and walked off into the dark stretch of pavement beyond the lamps and headlights.

Randy came out the back room a few minutes later, a stack of case-less DVDs around his finger.

"Anyone been in?" He asked.

"Nope," I said. "Nobody."

#

The same night, right before we closed, Randy told me he was quitting. He said his band had a chance to make it big, like Lamb of God big, and he had to devote more time to music. It was almost one in the morning, and, while I knew I would miss him, I guess I was glad that he was getting out. I figured it was his last chance to leave Sun Valley. A few more years at the Blockbuster and he'd be stuck—stuck going to high school football games on Friday nights for the rest of his life, stuck getting drunk in the beer tent every year during the demolition derby. Stuck with a capital S.

I told him I'd take out the trash if he counted the register. I locked both doors and flipped off the "Open" sign. The parking lot was nearly empty; just Randy's Neon and a few cars belonging to the third-shifters at Wal-Mart.

I walked out the back door, a trash bag over each shoulder, thinking about Randy. The night air was still muggy and dense and the short walk to our strip mall's dumpster was quiet. I heard something scratch and whine, and I figured the raccoons were back, but the sound grew louder as I got closer. The whines turned into words, nearly inaudible and indecipherable, but definitely words. Then the words turned into sobs.

Moving closer, I wringed the trash bag handles around my palms until the blood rushed hard through my fingertips. I thought of every horror movie I'd ever seen, and I figured this would be the perfect opportunity for some masked killer to spring up and stab me in the neck. But the sobs got louder and I realized monsters and knife-wielding psychopaths didn't make noises like that. These were pain noises. These were pleas. Rounding the corner of the dumpster, I dropped the bags and saw a dark mass, curled in the fetal position, back

pressed against the green metal. The mass shifted. It was alive— human—covered in what looked like dirt but what I later realized was ash.

That's when I smelled it. Dank and sharp, it reminded me of those times in the bowling alley when my friends would spark a lighter and hold it close to an uncovered leg; the little hairs hissing and popping, until the recipient felt the heat and pulled away. Burned hair. Burned hair. Burned hair. The words flashed in my head like those fat light bulbs that spell out CHARGE on a scoreboard. I smelled something else too, something smoky and charred; the crust you scrape off the grill in the springtime before a barbecue.

The mass moved again, but this time, it rolled over, and I saw that it was Anne. But not the Anne I had seen before, not the Anne with bloodshot eyes and bluish-purple bruises on her neck. No, this Anne had bright pink patches running across one of her forearms, a large black scab on the side of her face. When she moved, the dark skin on her cheek flaked off and fell like dirty snow.

The patches on her arm and face were burn marks. I could feel the heat coming off her skin.

My mind stuttered and I stood there staring. I couldn't move. I was scared— scared that whoever did this to her, would do it to me. I tasted iron on the back of my tongue and I thought I might throw up, but that wore off, and I sprinted. I was running away from Anne, screaming, screaming Randy's name and screaming for help.

When I reached the telephone, I couldn't remember what to dial. Pausing, I took a deep breath, and punched in the numbers. The phone rang and rang and rang, and I thought it might ring forever, but then I heard a woman's voice, calm and motherly, say, "What is your emergency?"

#

Randy drove us to a 24-hour IHOP on the other side of the city and a bus boy led us to an empty booth near the back of the restaurant. Most of the tables and booths were empty, but a few were occupied by sad looking men with beards and high school kids wearing baseball caps turned backward. It was four in the morning and I didn't want to go home, I didn't want to talk to my mother, explain what happened. It was hard enough talking to the police. The lights in the IHOP were so bright my eyes began to water and I thought I might cry, but before I could, a pink-haired teenage girl wearing a baby blue IHOP polo arrived to take our orders. She looked like an angel with those bright lights burning behind her hair. Randy decided on the strawberry vanilla French toast, and I chose the breakfast platter with bacon and scrambled eggs. While we waited for the food, Randy sucked Coke through a straw until the glass was empty.

"The world is fucked," he said, spinning his straw through the ice cubes.

When our food arrived, Randy poured syrup on top of the French toast and sawed through layers of fried dough and strawberry filling, rapidly forking the stuff into his cheeks, barely taking the time to chew before he swallowed. I ate some of the eggs and toast, but I couldn't manage the bacon. The smell made me sick to my stomach.

"You gonna eat that?" Randy pointed with his fork and when I shook my head, he stabbed a slice of bacon and dragged it through a pool of maple syrup. As he chewed, mouth open, brown bits sticking to his teeth, I couldn't help but picture Charlton Heston with blood running down his face, being pulled along on a stretcher, shouting, *Soylent Green is people!*

In the past, that scene had always struck me as melodramatic and funny, but thinking about it then made my gut bubble and I fought the urge to vomit.

Randy finished eating and pointed at my forearm. A few flakes of black dust held to the tiny hairs above my wrist. Randy licked his finger and reached across the table, buffing out the black smudges.

Ash, I thought. *Anne.*

The spots on my arm that Randy had touched were warm and damp and I felt a strange sensation. I felt this deep, infantile desire to be held. I wanted to be swaddled in hands and arms, sweatshirts and IHOP polos. I wanted to be cradled like a child. An urge swelled in my brain and I began to fantasize. I picture everyone in the restaurant—the pink-haired waitress, the bus boys, the bearded men, the teenagers, the cooks in the kitchen—walking toward our table. They stood in a long line, and one after the other, placed their hands on my head, my arms, my shoulders, until there was no room left and my face and chest were completely covered. No one spoke, and the restaurant was silent. I could feel the blood pumping through the palms and fingers, and I felt safe.

The urge subsided and the dream ended, and Randy asked our waitress for the check. We paid and left a few singles on the table.

"I guess we should leave," Randy said, and I wanted to say no, I wanted to say, *just a few more minutes*.

"I guess we have to," I said.

The Prison Moons of Jupiter

It's the middle of winter and Larry's living in Tomahawk, Wisconsin, trying to get sober. He's staying in Chuck's cabin on Clear Lake. It's a nice place with a wood burning fireplace and a patio overlooking the water. Sometimes when the fire gets going, fog grows on the windowpanes like a mold until the white-capped treetops outside are nearly invisible and the snow-covered lake looks like a desert.

Larry opens the door to the porch and kicks a path through the snow. It's dark and cold; the winter feels eternal. A thermometer shaped like a Green Bay Packers football helmet dangles from the railing, the red mercury hovering between ten and fifteen degrees. He brushes snow from a patio chair with the thick ski gloves he found in the bedroom closet beside old movies and paperback Science Fiction novels. He takes a glove off with his teeth and pulls a pack of cigarettes from his jacket pocket.

"I don't want your money," Chuck had said. "I know hard times. Me and Becky hit some rough patches. Stay as long as you need. But no smoking in the house."

Larry thought it was the kindest thing anyone had ever done for him, or maybe it only felt that way because of the year he'd had. He lost his job working for a company that sold bulk supplies—chalices and altar breads—to Catholic churches across the state, ("I'll pray for your future employment," his supervisor offered) and when he couldn't find work, he started drinking again. Jane gave him an ultimatum a few months later: get sober or leave.

Larry left and rented an apartment in Appleton until the money ran out. He figured he was a week or two out from eviction when Chuck called.

Chuck said he talked to Jane, said he heard about AA meetings in Tomahawk. The cabin is isolated, he said. Quiet. It didn't take much convincing, but Larry got as drunk as he could the night before they left, burping up brandy the next morning while Chuck drove the two hours north up Highway 51.

A week later, Larry went to his first meeting, where he met Bill, his sponsor.

Larry lets the cigarette rest in the corner of his mouth. He puts on his glove and watches the sky, the cigarette bobbing up and down with every drag. The stars are bright out here, and there are so many. Larry thinks about the size of the universe. He thinks, considering the bigness of everything, his sobriety doesn't really matter. In his meetings, the other recovering alcoholics talk about God's investment in their personal struggles, but something about this strikes Larry as selfish. He figures God could give two shits about his sobriety.

Larry hasn't had a drink in thirteen days. He's been living in Tomahawk for two months.

He squints and tosses his cigarette off the porch, trying to make out the blaze orange flags attached to the three tip-ups he installed about twenty feet out on the lake, but it's too dark to see past the dock. He'd been baiting the hooks every couple hours and so far he's caught a few walleye and a northern pike. Larry was never much of a fisherman, but checking the hooks is as good a way to kill time as anything in Tomahawk. He lights another cigarette as he walks down the trail toward the lake, following his old boot prints. Just above

the horizon, above the treetops on the other side of the lake, Larry notices a particularly bright star. He forgets about the fish and watches the light shimmer.

Larry feels the faint buzz of his cell phone through layers of down and flannel, and he pulls it from his pocket. He sees Jane's name and number on the display. They haven't spoken since he moved to Tomahawk. Slipping the top of the phone beneath his hat, he hits the answer button.

"Larry." Jane's voice sounds raspy, tired.

"Hey."

"I'm sorry to call this late," she says.

"It's not that late," he says.

"I've been doing a lot of thinking lately. I'm not sure this is going to work," she says.

"What do you mean? What won't work?" he asks, the muscles in his shoulders tightening.

"Larry, honey." She might be crying. He can't tell. "I'm sorry."

"Sorry about what? What's there to be sorry about?"

"I can't do this over the phone. I need to see you. Can I come up there?"

"Jesus, Janey, what's there to do? Why do you need to see me?"

"I can't, I can't do this over the phone."

"I'm getting better. I'm getting help." Larry feels like a little boy, like he needs to beg.

Jane begins to whisper, as if she is ashamed of what she has to say. "No you're not. You're sitting in that cabin feeling sorry for yourself. You're doing what you've always done. But I'm fed up. I'm tired of being unhappy."

He holds the phone away from his ear, lets his hand hang at his waist. Jane keeps talking, her voice sounds far away, like they're speaking through paper cups. Larry sees the bright star again, floating low over the horizon. He trains his eyes on the star and closes the phone.

Jupiter, he thinks. *That's not a star. It's a planet.* He tries to push the phone call from his mind.

Larry doesn't know much about astronomy, but he recently read one of the paperback novels he found in Chuck's bedroom closet. He recognized a few of the authors on the wrinkled, peeling spines: Heinlein, Herbert and Clarke. *Sounds like a law firm,* Larry thought. He chose the shortest book; something called *The Prison Moons of Jupiter,* written by A.R. Lightfoot. The author photo showed a bearded man, his black, haggard eyes looking away from the camera. The cover was bent and torn, and the hand drawn depiction of a giant, metallic castle looming over an alien desert looked like it belonged airbrushed on the side of a 1960's Chevy Sportswagon.

When Larry found the book, he wanted to drink, but instead he read *Moons* in an afternoon. Then he read it again. It became a routine: whenever his legs started to bounce, when he had that taste on the back of his tongue, Larry would start a pot of coffee, unwrap a nicotine lozenge, and sit down beside the fireplace with his worn paperback.

Walk up to the cabin and start a pot of coffee. That's all you need to do.

The alternative, Larry decides, is to lie down on the ice and fall asleep—freeze to death to sound of water rushing below the ice.

Larry checks the tip-ups, finds all three hooks empty, save half a worm, and starts the climb back to the cabin. He hears the clink of metal against metal as the keys to Chuck's snowmobile rattle in his pocket. He imagines the sound of the engine turning over.

Coffee, lozenge, book. That's it.

Larry grabs a few logs from beside the shed, cradling them in his arms. They feel heavy like a child. Inside, he stacks the logs in the fireplace over a layer of embers. When the logs catch, he takes off his coat, starts a pot of coffee and sits beside the fire, thumbing through the pages of *Moons*. He can't bring himself to open the book. He stares at the cover then reads the copy on the back even though he's read it a dozen times before.

> From the author of *Your Other Choice is Death* and *The Inheritors of Time,* comes a mind-bending, speculative novel about love, loneliness and revenge—*The Count of Monte Cristo* for the Space Age. A thousand year in the future, mankind has been forcefully divided into several rigid social classes. Ruled by the aristocratic Overlords, the lower classes are exploited and manipulated, under threat of the privatized law enforcement and their intergalactic prison system spread out across the Milky Way.
>
> Richard Kendrick is a manual laborer, wrongly accused of murdering his wife, and sentenced to life in the galaxy's most secure prison on the Jupiter satellite Callisto. Left with only his willpower and humanity, Kendrick must overcome incredible odds and fight for his freedom, in hopes of becoming the only man to have ever escaped *The Prison Moons of Jupiter.*

The fire cracks, coffee drips and Larry taps his finger against the back of the book. He already knows what will happen. He understands his own weakness; the decision has been made. Now it's only a matter of how long he will convince himself otherwise.

Standing, he takes the cell phone from his pocket and walks to the kitchen. He turns the coffee maker off and pours the half-full pot into the sink. He flips the cell phone open. It beeps as he scrolls through his contacts. Bill's name flashes on the screen, highlighted by the black cursor. Larry's thumbs feel big and clumsy as he types out a text message.

Bill, I'm thinking about drinking. I need help. Please call me.

#

In the meetings, in front of the other alcoholics, Bill would say things like, "You can't do this alone," and "No man is an island." But in private, when Larry sat in Bill's living room and they watched Packers games together, drinking powdered Gatorade by the pitcher and talking strategy between plays, Bill would say things like, "You have to lie to yourself. You have to convince yourself that you are a better person than you really are. You have to pretend like you care about other people more than yourself."

#

Larry thinks about Bill as he drinks Pabst, seated at the bar of *The Bear Skin Inn*. His phone's been silent since he left the cabin. He wishes someone would call him.

The Bear, an old tavern off Highway 51, is riddled with bullet holes dating back to the 1930's when Chicago gangsters like Al Capone and John Dillinger used to hide out in the deep woods, holed up in secluded cabins. Larry scans the Plexiglas panes preserving the small, splintered circles behind the bar. He's vaguely familiar with the legend; it's one of the few tourist attractions Tomahawk has to offer. A sign beside the parking lot, lit by a snow-covered spotlight, reads: *Visit the bar where Mikey "Stumps" McGovern made his last stand.*

The bartender is a woman named Carol. She serves Larry another beer. He asks her what she knows about McGovern.

"They hid shotguns under the bar, like twenty of them, and there are escape tunnels that run all under the lot. Most are caved in now, but hey, pretty cool, right?" She points at Larry's stool. "Stumps could have been sitting right there when the cops got him."

The bar is nearly empty. A few ski tourists play darts in the corner and a heavy-set couple laughs loudly in a booth near the entrance.

"That's pretty great," Larry says. "Pretty goddamn unbelievable."

The bar clears out around midnight, after one of the skiers drops a pint glass and nicks her hand trying to pick up the shards. She's clearly embarrassed; everyone else is annoyed, including Larry, but he isn't prepared to go home. He pulls his wallet out, lays a couple twenties on the counter to show Carol he intends to stay. The gesture feels sleazy, and he's not proud of himself, but he doesn't want to be alone.

"Looks like it's you and me," Carol says, emptying a dustpan full of glass into the trash bin behind the bar.

"Sounds good," Larry says. "I'm just happy to be out of the house."

"Family trouble?" Carol asks.

"Sort of," Larry says.

She pulls a mop and bucket from behind the bar and throws soapy water over the puddle of beer. Larry watches the dusty television over the bar. The local news plays—muted and coated in fuzzy interference—blurry lines jumping across the reporter's face. Another drunken college kid drowned in the Mississippi outside LaCrosse. The cops think it was an accident. The investigation is ongoing.

When Carol finishes mopping, she fills two tumblers to the brim with ice, brandy and 7-Up, setting one on a napkin in front of Larry. He's feeling pretty drunk already, so he sips the drink cautiously. She wipes down the counter and leans against the back wall, drink in hand.

"You much of a reader?" Larry asks, pressing down on an ice cube, watching it submerge beneath the brandy.

"I listen to Agatha Christie books when I drive to St. Paul to see my boyfriend. Does that count?"

"Sure," Larry says. "Everybody loves a good mystery." They each take slow sips from the tumblers. "I've always assumed drinking on the job is frowned upon."

"I'm sure it is," Carol says. "I guess I'm trusting that you won't tell anyone."

"Keep making drinks this strong and I won't remember."

She laughs a little and looks at the television. Larry runs his finger around the rim of his drink. He wants to keep talking.

"I read something recently," Larry says. Carol nods, and he figures she's feigning interest, but he doesn't care. He's sick and tired of quiet.

"It's called *The Prison Moons of Jupiter.* It's a Science Fiction thing from the sixties. Real pulpy, *Buck Rodgers* stuff. It's something else. Like the *Count of Monte Cristo* but in space. You ever read *The Count of Monte Cristo?"*

"Like the sandwich?" Carol asks.

"Yeah, like the sandwich."

"Can't say I have."

"Well," Larry says, leaning across the bar, spilling brandy over the sides of his glass. "They're both about wrongful imprisonment."

He begins to describe *Moons*, chapter by chapter, explaining how Richard Kendrick is framed for murder, sent away to Callisto, where he rots in solitary confinement for years, thinking only of freedom and revenge. He describes Kendrick's gradual breakdown, his descent into madness.

"Then," Larry says. "Things get weird."

"Weird how?" Carol asks polishing the inside of a pint glass with a mud colored washcloth.

"Philosophical," he says. He checks his phone again. Still no calls. Still no messages. "After thirty years or something, one of the prison guards gives Kendrick this book. It's a religious thing written by some prophet in like 2225. The prophet was some sort of space wizard, and this book is full of proverbs about peace and love and meditation."

"Space wizard?" Carol's eyebrows jump. "Jesus. This is some book." She pulls two bottles of beer from a refrigerator behind the counter. "Last call," she says.

Larry slides a twenty across the bar, accidentally pushing it through a small puddle of spilled liquor.

"Anyway, Kendrick becomes obsessed. He prays all day long. He turns into some sort of monk. He stops thinking about revenge. He doesn't try to escape." Larry takes half sips from his bottle, trying to drag this out, trying to stay a little longer.

"Then what?" Carol asks.

"Then he dies," Larry says. "He grows old and gets sick and dies in his prison cell. But that's not the end. Right before he's about to go, lying on his deathbed, Kendrick has this dream. But you're not sure if it's real or not."

"What kind of dream," Carol asks, and Larry thinks she might actually be interested in what he has to say.

"It's like a vision. He's visited by the space wizard, the prophet he's been praying to. They talk for a while, Kendrick asks a lot of questions about life and death and then the wizard shows Kendrick how to open his prison cell door."

"What? How?"

"He says, he says." Larry spreads his arms wipe, does his best space wizard impersonation. "'The prison cells, you see, they lock from the inside.' That's what he says. Then he takes Kendrick's hand and they walk out of the cell together, and that's the end."

"But he doesn't really escape? He's dead right?"

Larry shrugs and shakes his head. "I guess it's open for interpretation."

"That doesn't seem very satisfying," Carol says. She walks around the bar, to the front door, where she flips the power switch on the "Open" sign.

But it is, Larry thinks. The final line of the novel spins in his head (he had it memorized by his third time through) but he's too embarrassed to say it. He's wasting Carol's time. He knows she doesn't care. The last sip of beer tastes metallic like iron and it reminds Larry of the taste of blood, and he wishes he'd stayed in the cabin with his coffee and the fireplace.

"Goddamnit," Larry whispers, like he finished a long joke and the punch line didn't land. "Ah, goddamnit." The raised lip on the edge of the bar looks inviting, so he rests his

forehead against the cold wood. There are so many things Larry doesn't want to think about, so he remembers that final line instead.

They walk, hand and hand, to the edge of the moon, watching the planets spin until the stars fade and the sun collapses in on itself.

"You OK there, killer?" Carol slaps him on the back and he lifts his head from the bar. "Looks like we need to get you home. Got a ride?"

"I can walk," he says, but it comes out jumbled. "I'm pretty close." He feels the ground shift as he stands and the room begins to tilt, like the Earth's axis has called it quits. Drunkenness is comfortable for Larry, so he navigates the tricky terrain easily, giving Carol a hug on his way to the door. She stands rigid, arms at her sides.

"Thanks for the story," she says. "Stay safe."

#

Outside, the gravel parking lot is covered in a fresh layer of snow. Larry slips and stumbles on his way to Chuck's snowmobile. The cabin is a few miles out, and there's no way he's walking. Carol's still inside the bar, flipping stools upside down and standing them on top of freshly sanitized tables. He waits until she's out of view and starts the snowmobile. He lights a cigarette, lets it hang from the corner of his mouth as he drives.

The runners slide easy through the powder, and Larry shoots across the highway, following a trail carved out parallel to the road. Cold air stings his face, makes his eyes water and he blinks away tears, thinking of Bill and Jane, and the reason he went to the bar in the first place. The snow comes down harder now; flakes stick to his lips, melting away in an

instant. Between the cigarette smoke and the snow, he's having a hard time making out the trail. Sometimes he forgets how dark the nights can be this far north.

The trail snakes away from the highway, leading back into the woods, where tree braches slap his jacket, cracking like whips. Here, the path narrows, leaving only a few feet of snow between the sled and thick tree trunks. He turns, spits his cigarette out, and looks straight ahead to find the downed body of a tree getting closer and closer by the second. He lets off the throttle, but it's too late to slow down or swerve, there's only enough time for Larry to feel relieved.

When the runners catch and the hood tangles with the frozen stump, momentum carries Larry over windshield. For a moment, his flight feels graceful, like the accident was coordinated, rehearsed—a circus performer shot out of a cannon—but then gravity pulls and he tumbles through the snow, flailing and spinning, until everything stops and he's on his back looking up at the night sky. The stars twirl and he tries to keep his eyes open, but he can't.

Larry's not sure how long he's been asleep, but when he opens his eyes, he sees the stars again. They're closer now and all around him. The forest is gone, replaced by the black expanse of space. He's millions of miles from Earth, all alone, floating in a vacuum, wearing his winter coat and ski gloves. The stars are still and silent, but Larry feels something—something warm—spreading along his back. Light seeps in from over his shoulders, sharp and gold, and his back grows hotter and hotter until his jacket bubbles and his skin burns.

He's trembling now, wishing for the forest, for the wrecked snowmobile, but he wants to turn. He wants to see. Using his arms to gain momentum, Larry waves through the emptiness, spinning toward the heat.

What he sees is this: a star, not our Sun, but a massive ball of fire and light larger than anything he had ever imagined. Strands of yellow plasma flick and curl out into space; white splotches of energy radiate and pulse on the surface. The star feels alive somehow. Larry's eyes bleed as he watches the terrible light shudder. His skin blisters and cracks, flaking into dust, and all he can think to do is to tell the star that he's sorry. He's made a mistake. He'll do better next time. But he can't speak; his body is dissolving, melting into elements, pulled into orbit by the star's gravity. What's left of him spins around the fire, mixing with atoms as old as the universe.

When he opens his eyes again, he's looking up at the sky, lying flat on his back in a foot of snow. He's still drunk, but he can feel that his shoulder is separated and his wrist is probably broken. He sits up, pain flares in his stomach and he sees the mangled snowmobile merged with the broken tree. He lies back down, reaching for the cell phone in his coat pocket.

Larry knows he's hurt. He needs an ambulance. Prone and dizzy, he holds the phone in front of his face and closes one eye so the screen will stop spinning. The display shows six missed calls and two text messages; the most recent pops up on the screen. It's from Bill.

Just got your message. I tried to call. Get back to me when you get this.

Larry can't remember why he took the phone out, and he's not sure what Bill is talking about, so he navigates to the inbox and finds the other message. It's also from Bill.

Remember, it reads. *You are not alone.*

He's not sure what this means either. He can't think straight. He sets the phone on his chest and looks up. For a moment, Larry thinks the stars are falling, but he realizes it's just

the snow floating down past the treetops. Larry thinks about Bill's message, remembers the dream, and for the first time in his life, truly knows what it means to be afraid.

Red Light Days

Last year, at the annual Sun Valley High School faculty Halloween party, I dressed as Jack Torrance, Nicholson's character from the 1980 Stanley Kubrick film, *The Shining*. I went to three Goodwills across the county until I found a sport coat the same dark maroon as the jacket in the film. I already owned a replica of the axe in the movie, but my wife, Vicki, strongly suggested I buy a prop at the Halloween store, or build the axe out of foam or wood. In the end, I conceded, but I wasn't very happy about the whole thing. I value authenticity, verisimilitude, the knowledge that physical presentation can accurately represent the internal.

I fashioned a rig out of PVC piping and old coat hangers that held a vertical, two-by-three sheet of cardboard, painted to look like that shattered bathroom door from (arguably) the film's most famous sequence. Then I cut a face-sized hole in the cardboard and fiddled with the flimsy edges until they looked like splintered wood. The entire outfit cost me $26.67. At various times throughout the night, I approached my co-workers, poked my head through the hole and raised the axe over my head, screaming, *Heeerrreee's Johhhny!*

After I snuck up on Frau Muller, the freshman-level German instructor, and gave her such a scare that she spilled red wine down her lederhosen (an uninspired costume if you ask me), Vicki pulled me aside, and in a series of shrill whispers, requested that I remove the costume, apologize, and make an attempt to socialize properly. I complied but felt naked without the frayed cardboard scratching against my chin and cheeks. Frau Muller accepted my apology graciously, with a "Nein," and a smile. I asked about her classes, her students, if

she enjoyed teaching. I've developed a system, something like a mental flowchart, for use in interactions with my co-workers. It almost always begins with the same question: "How are your classes going?" and based on the response, the conversation can go one of two ways, either as a continuation of that thread leading to a discussion of the difficulties of communicating with a generation of apathetic, hormonal, possibly stoned children, or if the conversation stalls, if my interlocutor states that their classes are simply "good," I can turn to weekend plans or vacation ideas.

I was running through my chart, attempting to keep the conversation moving at a natural pace when Muller threw me a curveball.

"Oh, the students are fine, but they complain to much, always whining. 'Wir haben zu viele Hausaufgaben.'" She mimed the mouths of her students with her hand. The flowchart didn't account for the introduction of foreign languages and I couldn't locate a proper response, so we stood for a moment before Frau Muller said she needed a refill. When she was gone, I stared at a motivational poster featuring an NBA player holding a copy of *Crime and Punishment* in one hand and a blue and white basketball in the other.

Any plans for the weekend? I thought, and then, *viele.* Was that a verb? A cognate? To viel. To feel? Did Frau Muller's students complain about their feelings? If I had another chance, if could convince Muller to start again, conduct the conversation exactly as it was, there would be no awkward pause, the flowchart could be amended. "Ah, I see," I would say. "And how exactly are your students feeling?"

Vickie drove us home, still wearing her cat ear headband, tail draped over the center console. I spun the tail between my fingers, running my thumb through the fuzzy, frayed tip. When I looked at her, passing headlights momentarily illuminated the black whiskers she'd

drawn (hurriedly, twenty minutes before the party) across her cheeks with eyeliner. We drove for a few minutes before I realized she was crying.

"I hate Halloween," she said, smudging the whiskers with the back of her hand.

I plucked stray fuzz from the tail, looked out the window. It was after midnight. From the passenger seat, I watched two teenage boys, dressed as a goblin and a pirate, ramming their heels into a family of glowing pumpkins that lined the porch of a dimly lit, single-story home. The pirate's dreadlocks flailed as he stomped, orange goop oozing beneath his boot.

"Why are you crying?" I asked.

You're such a fucking robot, she told me once while we were dating, after her father had his first heart attack. *Have you ever felt anything?* Critics said the same thing about Kubrick's films, that they were cold and clinical. The said his movies lacked emotion.

"It's a holiday for *children*," she said, gripping the steering wheel with both hands.

Psychological handicaps aside, I understood that this statement held several layers of criticism. One: I was an adult, and shouldn't invest so much time and energy into the creation of a Halloween costume. Two: I needed to grow up. Three: without a child, we didn't have any real stake in the holiday. These issues had been discussed previously; they remained sticking points.

"When do you want to have kids?" she asked.

"I want to have kids when you want to have kids. I'm ready when you are." I wanted her to stop crying, so I told her what she wanted to hear.

"I'm ready now," she said.

#

I've seen *The Shining* more times than I can remember. I know the number is in the hundreds, but I lost count in college. I'm not sure I really grasped the movie's genius until my sixtieth viewing. There are things I don't yet understand (The bunny costume blowjob scene, Ullman's impossible window) and my theory isn't watertight, but I know I'm getting close to the heart of the movie, approaching that bloody, beating center.

Kubrick used a secret visual language in his films, embedding subliminal clues, a series of ciphers, below the surface narrative. In his filmography, *The Shining* exists in a sort of limbo, between his more commercial work (if you can call any of his work commercial) like *Spartacus* and *2001,* and the more artistic, abstract films like *A Clockwork Orange* and *Eyes Wide Shut.* On the surface, *The Shining* appears to be a straightforward horror picture, with its axe-wielding psychopath and brief blasts of horrific violence, but below the slick veneer and neat packaging, something much more personal and terrifying lurks, waiting to be discovered.

#

I think there's something wrong with me. Maybe not wrong exactly, but different. There must have been some mishap in my youth, some mistake in the structuring of my mental framework, because, as far as I know, I see the world differently than other people. I have a sense of the underlying forces that dictate everyday actions, a knowledge of those ephemeral undercurrents that move behind the veil, beyond the frame. It's not that I believe in some sort of god, I just understand patterns; I take stock in the obscure events most people disregard as coincidental. And while I know what you are thinking, I am by no means psychotic,

schizophrenic, or regularly under the influence of any hallucinogenic narcotics. I simply allow myself to perceive.

Take stoplights for example. I know that there are nine intersections between my home and Sun Valley High School. I know that on weekday mornings, the stoplights are timed to help limit traffic congestion. The way I interact with these nine stoplights determines the overall tone of each day. Four green lights or more, and my day will go smoothly, no major problems. Four yellow lights or more means things could go badly—a disruptive student, an awkward encounter with Principal McDonald—either way it's a bad sign. More than four red lights means a red light day. A red light day indicates impending disaster. Imagine riding your bike down a steep hill, imagine feeling normal, like you belong on that bike, imagine someone jamming a stick between the front wheel spokes, imagine flying off the bike headfirst into the asphalt. Red light days serve as reminders that I am different, indicators that I will always be separate.

#

A few months after Halloween, in January or February (I'm not sure, but I remember snow) Vicki came down to the basement shuffling a stack of paper. I sat on the stain-covered loveseat I bought in college (Vicki wouldn't let me keep it in the living room upstairs) watching *The Shining* and taking notes on my laptop. The basement wasn't finished, so it smelled like mildew, and I had to constantly tune the television volume so I could hear over the buzzing furnace. Copper poles stood exposed throughout the room, and I used a plastic box full of old records as a coffee table.

Vicki asked if she could sit and if I wouldn't mind pausing the movie.

"Jack," she said. "I found something on the Internet and I was wondering if I could ask you some questions."

(Did I mention my name is Jack? Because that's important. I consider it rather serendipitous. Jack Torrance, Jack Nicholson, Jack Wisniewski.)

"What sort of questions?"

"They're more like statements. It's like a personality test," she said. It was late at night, and she wore her pajamas, red and black flannel sweatpants and a zip-up hoodie. I had a sense of where this was heading. We'd discussed the idea of therapy in the past, the possibility of medication to ease my social anxiety, but I have a difficult enough time articulating my feelings internally, the prospect of sharing them with someone else seemed near impossible. Thoughts of openly discussing my anxiety made me anxious.

"I don't understand." When I paused the DVD, the movie froze on the frame in which Jack Torrance clumsily collides with Delbert Grady, the previous caretaker of the Overlook Hotel and the man who convinces Torrance to murder his wife and son. In the frame, a single champagne flute—full of what appears to be orange juice—hangs suspended in the air, perpetually half-spilled.

"Chelsea, from work, she told me about it. She said it really helped her understand her husband. I'm not supposed to tell you any more. I don't want to color your answers. Flatter me."

"Fine," I said. "But the movie stays on." I pressed play and turned the volume down low. On the screen, the champagne flute fell to the ground and shattered.

"You can answer four ways: definitely agree, slightly agree, slightly disagree or definitely disagree. Ready?"

I nodded and watched as Grady dabbed a towel against Jack's coat.

"Number one: it does not upset me if my daily routine is disturbed."

"Definitely disagree."

I didn't need the volume on; I had memorized most of the dialogue between viewings twenty and forty. I watched Grady's lips move, mouthing the words myself. *I'm sorry to differ with you sir, but YOU are the caretaker. You've always been the caretaker. I should know sir; I've always been here.*

"When I talk on the phone, I'm not sure when it's my turn to speak."

"Slightly agree."

Some critics have suggested the red and white lavatory scene, in addition to Jack referencing the "white man's burden" and the specific placement of a Calumet tobacco tin early in the film, highlight Kubrick's concern with the genocide of American Indians; Jack Torrance representing white Europeans, his family analogous to Native Americans. I find this theory rather reductive. If Kubrick wanted to make a political movie, he would have (in fact, he made several). In *The Shining*, Stanley was after something much more personal and elusive, some enigmatic element of human consciousness.

"People often tell me that I keep going on and on about the same thing," Vicki said, laughing quietly to herself.

"Definitely agree."

"I notice patterns in things all the time."

"Definitely agree."

"I find it easy to play games with children that involve pretending."

"Definitely disagree."

There were fifty questions total, and when Vicki finished, she borrowed my laptop and plugged the information into some online calculator. Biting her lip, she clicked furiously.

"How'd I score?" I asked.

"Pretty high," she said.

"Is that good or bad?" I asked.

"I'm not sure," she said, closing the laptop. She wrapped an arm around my shoulder, kissed me on the cheek, and said, "Can we watch something else?"

"Of course not," I said.

#

I teach a senior level video production course at Sun Valley High School. In the spring semester, we're tasked with creating a send-off video for the graduating class. Past videos were burned to DVDs and handed out after the graduation ceremony, but this year the school board decided to screen the film during the ceremony itself, before the handing out of diplomas. A few years ago, after a series of budget cuts, I was forced to provide a large portion of the camera equipment myself. Across the seven semesters I've taught the class, I've purchased a Canon DSLR, a steadicam stabilizing system, a skater camera dolly slider, in addition to various audio equipment and editing programs. Considering the hefty financial investment, I take my work very seriously. In fact, my aspirations had grown over the years. Like Stanley, I'm self taught, and with every new production, with each graduating class, I feel closer and closer to creating something that transcends the constraints of the graduation video genre, something that speaks to the greater human experience, something truly artful.

By March we were already behind schedule. One yellow light day, we were filming on the football field. I stood behind the end zone while the rest of class sat in the bleachers, watching and taking notes. A row of twelve cheerleaders (in *The Shining*, Hallorann warns Danny Torrance not to go into room 237; two plus three plus seven equals twelve) dressed in their red and white uniforms, lined the edge of the field, preparing for an elaborate routine in which they would jump and cartwheel across the width of the field. It was early in the afternoon and as I looked through the viewfinder, I saw a thick wave of fog float across the grass, wrapping around the legs of my directing assistant, Kang, who stood on the 15-yard line.

Kang is a fat Hmong kid with directorial aspirations. Three to four times a week, he wears a neon green t-shirt with a picture of Ol' Dirty Bastard's face on the chest. He likes to quote *Pulp Fiction* and Dave Chappelle. He shares my affinity for film criticism and once he told me about a theory he read on the Internet claiming all of Tarantino's films exist in the same hyper-violent, pop-culture obsessed universe. He told me almost all of Tarantino's characters were related in some way. I found this theory incredibly interesting. I knew then that Kang would get an A.

"Further," I yelled down the field. "Keep going."

Kang walked backwards, looking over his shoulder.

"Perfect." I gave Kang a thumbs up and he shuffled out of the frame.

Many critics insist that Kubrick's early work in still photography accounts for the persistent use of one-point perspective shots in his filmography. He valued symmetry and clean lines (consider the hotel hallways in *The Shining,* the monolith standing in the exact center of the white room at the end of *2001*). The goal post in the far end zone served as my

vanishing point, the field's boundary lines creating a sort of organic frame for the scene, so that through the camera lens, the green grass and white lines all appeared to converge just beyond the horizon. After fiddling with the focus for a moment, I shouted action and the cheerleaders bounced from one sideline to the other, smiling hard and waving to the camera. One of the girls stopped, still in frame, and began to giggle.

"Again," I yelled, back bent, watching through the viewfinder.

It went on like this for a while (17 takes total) until a frail girl named Becky slipped on the wet grass and sprained her ankle. We called the athletic trainer and she drove down to the field in her golf cart, bearing athletic wrap and ice packs. In the distance, I heard the buzz of the bell, and the small crowd of students migrated back toward the school. When they were gone, I thought about those yellow lights and prayed that I had usable footage.

I carefully packed up the camera equipment and sat on the bleachers overlooking the field. There was something beautifully symmetric about the long white lines and bold numbers painted on the grass. I don't care much for sports, but the fields, the diamonds, the courts all appeal to that ridged part of my mind, the part that craves order.

I pulled a brown paper bag from my backpack, along with a book Vicki bought for me titled *Social Dyslexia: Learning to Live with Asperger's Syndrome.* Reading, I took slow bites of my crustless peanut butter and honey sandwich. I started from the corners and ate the sandwich in a spiral, turning the bread in my free hand. The second chapter was titled "Help Me Help You" and it detailed several steps intended to help Aspies (that's what the calls themselves) break down social and emotional barriers. The first step involved openly communicating feelings and emotions with family members and loved ones. The writing was dry and it lacked a certain depth.

A strange thing happens when those quirks, those idiosyncrasies that make up your personality are given a label, especially when that label falls into the category of disorder. No longer are your habits endearing, unique, instead they become gratingly ubiquitous and you begin to notice them everywhere. The way you speak, the way you eat, the things you think all become reminders that you are strange, that society has created a label in an effort to delineate the differences between you and normal people.

When I finished the sandwich, my fingertips were covered in honey. I tried to turn the pages, but the paper stuck together.

#

The Shining begins with an extended helicopter shot of Glacier National Park, the camera holding on dark blue water before sweeping low past a small island, then over rock formations, between sheer granite cliffs, until we see the Torrance family's yellow Volkswagen Bug driving down a winding, single-lane highway sandwiched between endless rows of pine trees. The camera follows the car from a distance as the credits scroll up the screen, deep synthesized organ notes playing in the background, droning like a futuristic dirge. Garrett Brown, Kubrick collaborator and inventor of the steadicam stated in an interview after Stanley's death that the director agonized over the color of the opening titles. Viewed on the original 35 millimeter film the credits appear a shade or two darker than sky blue, but with the help of high definition restoration, we can see the font's hue is closer to a turquoise.

I intended to replicate this shot in my graduation send-off video, but rather than panning across a national park, my shot would zoom up to and over Sun Valley High School.

Due to budgetary restraints I was forced to work with miniatures (which Kubrick used in several films, including *The Shining*). Over the last two semesters, with Kang's assistance, I'd created a scale model of the high school using cardboard, wood and various pieces from a range of model kits. My classroom belonged to the chemistry department before the renovations, so there's a large storage closet connecting my room to Mrs. Holcomb's, the ornery old woman who teaches AP History, and I used the space to construct my simulacrum. Holcomb sometimes complained to Principal McDonald about my use of the room, and I began to suspect she was sabotaging the model, shifting the matchbox cars around, stealing the tiny plastic pine trees, but as of yet, I've been unable to produce any hard evidence.

On a green light day, after school, I stood with Kang in the storage closet looking over the model. From above the high school looked like an angular, uppercase V with a few rectangular appendages jutting out from the main structure. The model stood on a sturdy card table I bought on Craigslist, fashioned to the ground with duct tape. Kang owned a set of portable green screens and we placed them on two sides of the model. In postproduction, Kang would help me superimpose the surrounding buildings, a clear cloudless horizon behind the school. The miniature wasn't ideal, but even auteurs need to account for technological limitation.

"You think like this is what God sees when he's looking down?" Kang dabbed a blot of superglue to the cleats of a football player figurine. He fixed the figure to the green felt of the tiny football field.

"There is no God," I told him, popping the camera into the steadicam's clasps.

"Sure, I guess. But it feels good to have created something like this. It feels sort of powerful."

"That's good," I said. "That's the creative process. You're the god of this world, or co-god maybe. But creation comes with responsibility."

"That's some Uncle Ben shit," Kang laughed, but I didn't follow. "Spiderman? You know, Peter Parker?"

I shrugged and aimed the camera on the single road leading to the high school. We used sculpting clay for the pavement, painted it black or grey, adding yellow lines in parking lot, cracks and potholes in the small cul-de-sac where the buses wait before and after school.

"Never mind," he said.

"There's a hypothetical contract you sign when you make something. Our viewers have certain expectations. They want truth. They want revelation."

"It's a graduation video," Kang said. He worked his way around the model, jiggling each piece, ensuring proper cementation.

"But it's more than that. It encompasses ideas beyond graduation. Universal concepts like change and internal development. We're putting ourselves, our souls into this thing. Every single frame is relevant, every single detail should say something about us, how we see the world."

"Fuck yeah," Kang said. "We're gonna break some minds."

"Exactly." I turned the camera on, looked through the viewfinder. The model, our tiny world, stood frozen in time, rigid and exact. It was my own mind manifest, and everything was in the proper place.

#

After my discovery of Chili's Chipotle Chicken Crispers a year into our marriage, Vicki and I had spent almost every Thursday evening sitting in the same back corner booth of the Sun Valley Chili's, drinking blackberry margaritas and eating bottomless baskets of tortilla chips until, at the end of the meal, Vicki invariably stated that she either needed to unbutton her pants, or was going to puke. The wait staff recognized us, appreciated our consistency. Vicki had made it clear that these meals were a concession, so to even things out, she would pick the television program we watched that night, usually deciding—after an hour or so of channel surfing—on *Ghost Hunters* or *The Real Housewives of So-and-so County.*

In the restaurant, Vicki dipped a tortilla chip in thin, watery salsa. We ate quickly, clearing the basket in minutes. I gave her an update on the graduation video. She seemed more interested than usual, asking questions between bites. We were full by the time our meals arrived, and after a buffalo wing and a southwestern eggroll, Vicki said she never wanted to eat again. She leaned back in the booth and gripped her stomach.

"Look, I've got a food baby," she pressed her stomach out, pinched the skin between her hands. "I can feel it kick."

I dipped a chicken crisper in ranch dressing.

"If I feel better when we get home, we should try tonight." She stared at me, raised an eyebrow.

"Try what?"

"You know."

"Oh," I said. "Sure."

While I was certainly afraid of having a child, having my own tiny person to feed and clothe and protect and fill with knowledge, there was also something about Vicki that made me nervous. Since she gone off birth control, something had changed. The tone of our sex had shifted. She seemed more driven, focused, acutely aware of our goal. There was no foreplay, no make out sessions on the couch. We weren't having sex, we were attempting to procreate.

"I hope *Ghost Hunters* is on tonight," she said.

#

I found Gillian on a green light day. She sat alone at the end of a long, rectangular cafeteria table, dragging half a breadstick through a pile of marinara. Wednesdays, I worked lunch duty, weaving between rows of hungry students, on the lookout for bullies, or football players secretly chucking baby carrots across the room.

We were in the last stages of production on the send-off video, but I still needed an actress for the final scene; a long tracking shot following a single student through hallways and classrooms as she offered words of wisdom and encouragement, while athletes, cheerleaders and members of every extracurricular activity danced, dribbled, or celebrated on the edges of the frame. The scene would end with the camera pulling away from the student, backing out through the front doors, focusing on the school's entrance as the camera moved further and further away until those bright red doors were no longer visible. The final shot would parallel the video's opening and act as an inverse to the closing frames of *The Shining.* I got the idea after Kang showed me a YouTube video of a senior class in Colorado

participating in some elaborately choreographed dance number. My scene would incorporate almost everyone, and it would represent the whole of the high school experience.

A few pretty, popular girls (drama students and track stars) auditioned for the part, but they were too excitable, too bubbly. Graduation—moving on in general—carries with it a sense of conclusion, the uncomfortable realization of change. I needed someone who could embody that melancholy.

Gillian was gangly and quiet, with dark hair, bad teeth and eyes that appeared perpetually on the verge of tears. I stood beside her table and rapped my knuckle against the wood. She dropped her breadstick and looked up, startled eyes shining.

"Have you ever acted?" I asked.

She finished chewing and swallowed.

"Excuse me?"

"Have you ever acted, like in a play?" I asked

"I played Mary in the nativity thing at my church."

"Wonderful," I said.

She blinked and blinked, and looked down at her tray.

#

We finished shooting the send-off video on a red light day, in a long hallway beside the gymnasium, lined with black and white class photos. I'd chosen the school's narrowest hallway in an attempt to recall the claustrophobic corridors of the Overlook Hotel. Holding the camera, I walked backwards, camera trained on Gillian as she moved through a crowd of students wearing jerseys and letter jackets, multi-colored t-shirts and enormous red wigs.

Some kids held signs that read “Class of 2009” or “SVHS 4 Life” others shook pompoms and danced, flailing wildly. Kang walked behind me, occasionally shouting stage directions through a megaphone. The entire scene would account for roughly three minutes of footage in the final film.

I was right about Gillian, she was a tremendous talent, but that day she seemed preoccupied and distant, unable to remember lines, failing to imbue her words with emotion. She wore glittery makeup and an Academic Decathlon sweatshirt. On the ninth take, she stumbled over the word “graduation.” On the twelfth, she tripped over a shoelace.

“Quick Break.” Kang’s voice sounded fuzzy and robotic projected through the megaphone. I took Gillian aside and asked her what was wrong.

“I’m tired,” she said. “And I still have AP Psychology homework.”

“Focus. I need you to focus. We’re almost there. This is more important than Psychology.”

“I’m trying,” she said.

“Try harder,” I said.

We took our places and started shooting again. I could tell the crowd was growing restless, the dancers slowed, the pompom shakers looked lethargic.

“Energy people!” Kang called over my shoulder.

“In some ways,” Gillian began. I mouthed the words behind the camera, following closely. “Graduation marks the end of something. But in other ways it represents a new beginning. It marks the…ahh…” Gillian paused and looked at the ground.

“Jesus Christ.” I whispered.

“Again,” Kang called.

A short, curly haired kid carrying a French horn interrupted take twenty-two. Gillian ruined takes twenty-six through thirty with poor enunciation. I pulled her into the deserted gym after take thirty-six. We stood under a basketball hoop. The shadow of the net zigzagged across her face.

"Why are you doing this to me?" I asked. I really couldn't understand.

"I'm doing my best," she said.

"No you're not. If you were doing your best, we'd be done by now."

"I'm sorry," she said.

"Don't be sorry," I said. "Just do it right."

We made it halfway through take thirty-seven before Gillian started to cry.

#

The Shining is really about mental health. It's the story of an unstable man, attempting to defeat his own demons in the aim of become a better father and husband. Jack Torrance is scared of his family. He fears he'll never be able to provide for them. He knows that his mental handicaps limit his ability to love. That's why he takes his wife and son to the Overlook Hotel. Jack knows the only way he can overcome his emotional deficiencies is by confronting and examining the convoluted corridors of his own mind.

The Overlook Hotel is the physical manifestation of Jack's mental state. This idea accounts for the various unrealities presented throughout the film (the cordless television set, Jack's convenient release from the kitchen's storage closet) and it explains the sudden appearance of Grady, Lloyd the bartender, and the naked woman in the bathtub. Each of these characters represents something Jack needs during his stay in the Overlook. When Jack

needs someone to talk to about his family, Lloyd appears out of the ether. When Jack needs someone to confirm a suspicion, the hotel creates Grady. When Jack needs to be loved, he finds the woman. Obviously, there's a dark side to each of these characters, and the underlying malevolence can be attributed to Jack's own tortured mind.

Most importantly though, my theory highlights the importance of the film's final scenes. In the penultimate sequence, Jack chases his son through the snow-covered hedge maze, where he gets lost and eventually freezes to death. The hedge maze is a part of the Overlook and therefore a projection of Jack's mind. He gets lost inside of himself, trapped in thoughts and fears, paralyzed by the inability to overcome his disorder.

#

I hit three red lights on my way to the graduation ceremony. It started raining when I hit the fourth. My wipers waved, pulling red tinged water across the glass. While I knew this was an omen, a sign of things to come, I couldn't help but smile. The rain would force the ceremony indoors where the lighting and seating arraignment were more amenable to the viewing of projected video footage.

Inside the gymnasium, Kang and I set up the projector and the screen, trying to find a distance between them that would yield the proper resolution and clarity, while parents and grandparents shuffled to their seats on the bleachers. Long streams of red ribbon draped across the stage, and I felt the need to keep Kang constantly aware of his footing as he ran cables from the projector to the electrical outlet. Nothing would ruin this moment for me. No mishaps or technical difficulties. Those red lights, those ruby bulbs, those crimson eyes

burned in the back of my mind. But this was my day, and no pattern, no fucking superstition could take that away from away from me.

(By the way, Vicki might be pregnant. We haven't been to the doctor yet, but she took a few tests and they all came out positive. I probably should have mentioned that earlier. There's a chapter in *Social Dyslexia* titled: "Lying by Omission." It's something I'm working on.)

While we were screening some test footage (a few scenes from *2001)* to make sure the sound mix was perfect, Principle McDonald, Superintendent Stanton and several teachers entered the gym and filed on stage, hiking up their black billowy robes as they mounted the steps. They were early. I knew McDonald would try to screw me over. This was our cue. Music played over the loudspeakers, something orchestral and triumphant sounding. Kang and I took our seats behind the projector. We sat halfway between the bleachers and the stage, long rows of folding chairs to our left and right.

When McDonald and the faculty members were properly situated in their seats behind the podium, a seemingly endless, single-file line of graduating seniors streamed into the gym through a back entrance. The walked slowly, laughing, waving to the stands, their red and white robes dragging across the laminate hardwood. The seating process had been practiced, and the students executed efficiently. The room filled with the proud chatter of parents, the clicking of cameras. They were excited. *Just wait,* I thought.

With the seats full, the stage set, I signaled across the gym to Marvin the janitor. He flipped off the lights and after a series of fluorescent flickers the room went black. The students oohed and aahed. A few shouted nonsense or curse words.

"Shhhhhh!" I held a finger to my lips, holding the sound as long as I could. Kang did the same.

"Ladies and Gentlemen," McDonalds voice boomed through the darkness. "May I present to you, the class of 2009."

"Go time." I patted Kang on the back. He removed the projector's lens cover. White light shot across the room and the screen lit up. I bit my lip and pressed play. The movie began with the shot of our miniature high school, the pale blue credits rolling up the screen. Then I saw my name, bright and bold, suspended over the school, in the exact center of the frame.

"Gay!" A voice called out from my right, followed by a burst of laughter. But it didn't matter. The time for shhhing was past.

On the screen the opening titles ended, replaced with footage of various athletic events and extracurricular activities. Gillian's disembodied voice spoke over the scenes, sounding full and confident.

"What does graduation mean to me?" she asked. "New friends. New beginnings. Leaving something behind. I guess it means change, and change can be a little scary. But I think it's okay to be afraid."

The camera shifted from a baseball player connecting with a fastball, to a swimmer leaping off his block, to a student raising her hand in a crowded classroom.

"Facing your fears is a part of growing up."

I'd seen the footage so many times during the editing process it was difficult to view objectively. I wanted to see the reaction of my audience, the parents in the stands. I turned in my seat and squinted through the darkness. I could barely see their faces, but the light from

the screen reflected off their eyes, like faint stars in the night sky. In that light I saw knowledge and awe. I saw the unknowable become know. I saw I become We. I watched as they watched. I felt as they felt. During the video's twelve minute run time, that gaping chasm, that insurmountable distance between individual human minds was momentarily bridged. We watched together, and no one was alone.

Biographical Statement

Daniel Stintzi was born on December 27, 1988 in Lansing, Michigan. He received a BA in English from the University of Wisconsin-Madison in 2011. He is currently teaching and pursuing an MFA in Creative Writing from the Writing Seminars at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, Maryland.